



Comments by Suffolk City Manager R. Steven Herbert
Government Reform Committee hearing
Friday, October 10, 2003

On Monday, September 15, the City of Suffolk began preparation for the approach of Hurricane Isabel. At that time, the City's emergency management team began preparations to open the Suffolk Emergency Operations Center (EOC) on Wednesday morning, September 17.

At 11:00 a.m., Tuesday, September 16, a hurricane watch was issued for the Hampton Roads region. On Wednesday morning, September 17, the City's EOC was fully staffed and operational and at 10:00 a.m., the City of Suffolk declared a local state of emergency in anticipation of the storm. Suffolk public schools were closed at noon on Wednesday and five emergency shelters were opened by early that evening.

It was early Thursday morning when Suffolk began experiencing the effects of Hurricane Isabel. Sustained hurricane force winds were reported in Suffolk between the hours of 5 p.m. and 10 p.m. that evening though the City began experiencing significant power outages early that morning. By evening, the entire City was without electrical service.

It bears explaining at this juncture that our communications with both State and Federal agencies related to the hurricane was in accordance with State and Federal emergency management procedures that require local governments to communicate all emergency needs through the Virginia Emergency Operations Center (EOC). It is only after the storm has passed, during the disaster recovery phase, that direct communications with FEMA are appropriate.

By late morning on Thursday, twenty of the City's sanitary sewer pump stations were down due to power outages, and a city well system and the water treatment plant were already operating on generator power. At 11:00 a.m., the City made its first contact with the State EOC requesting emergency assistance. It was followed that afternoon with a formal written Resource Request. The City asked for State assistance with chainsaw crews to help clear our major transportation arteries and HUMVEES to transport these crews, generators to power the emergency shelters and sanitary sewer pump stations, and light stands for the shelters.

At 4:00 p.m. Thursday afternoon (9/18) an additional call was made to the State EOC stressing the need for emergency support. The only request from the City of Suffolk to the State EOC that was addressed was the request for a chainsaw crew to assist with clearing the major roadways. In response to the City's request for generators, the State EOC provided a list of vendors/dealers we could contact that might supply generators. None of those vendors were, however, able to provide us assistance.

Given the City's urgent need to provide power for the emergency shelters that housed special populations dependent on oxygen pumps and the like, at 4:30 p.m. on Thursday, City staff pulled generators from the Department of Health and a fire station to meet these critical needs.

The City's need for generators continued to escalate during the storm. While the City was able to protect its municipal water operations through the use of a back-up generator at the City's water treatment plant, thousands of citizens served by private and community well systems in outlying areas were without water due to the power outage.

The City has 107 sanitary sewer pump stations and approximately 23 of those stations were operating with existing back-up generators by early Thursday. There was serious potential for environmental problems if the other stations were not brought on line with some power source. Without generators or electrical power, the City had crews 24 hours a day rotating through the 107 pump stations doing pump and haul to avoid environmental problems with sewage overflow.

By Friday morning, the City had received no response from the State EOC on the provision of generators. At that time the City took independent action to purchase five generators from a local vendor, Womble Generator Inc., who was able to locate generators in Kentucky. Delivery of these generators on Friday allowed city crews to provide power to some key City sanitary sewer pumping stations.

On Friday morning, the City faxed a request to the State EOC for water buffalos for use in the Whaleyville borough to address the need for water in this rural area. A telephone call was made to the State EOC later that afternoon to follow up on request for a water buffalo and to again stress the City's need for generators to service additional pump stations and emergency shelters and for HUMVEES to transport personnel to clear roadways of downed trees.

It was Saturday morning when the State EOC notified the City that water buffalos could not be provided. No word was received on the other requests.

The City's first contact with FEMA officials was on Friday afternoon at 4 p.m. when FEMA staff, and representatives of the U.S. Army Corps and DEQ met with the City EOC staff to assess life safety issues. The City again explained its request and need for two water buffalos and generators for the shelters and pump stations.

At 7:15 p.m. Friday a situation report was sent online to State EOC to keep the State advised of the emergency situation in Suffolk. On Saturday, September 20, the City held another conference call with the State EOC to discuss ongoing assistance requests including the need for water, ice and generators. As the City had not received verification from the State EOC that our request for generators would be filled, the City ordered an additional 16 generators through Womble Generator, Inc. on Saturday. Those generators were received on Monday and were used to provide power to the sanitary sewer pumping stations and to the larger private well systems in the City that provided water to over 4,000 residents. It wasn't until Tuesday, 9/23, that the City was notified by the State EOC that FEMA had denied the City's request for generators to run these private community well systems.

The State EOC was contacted again at 7:00 p.m. on Saturday regarding the city's need for water and ice. A Resource Request was sent as follow up to this request at 8:15 p.m. and the City was notified that ice and water would be delivered to Suffolk Fire Station #5 on Sunday.

At 4:15 a.m. on Sunday morning, the City was notified that water and ice would be available at the Virginia Beach Pavilion around 3 p.m. that afternoon but that the City would be required to pick it up. The City was able to arrange for local businesses to provide trucks for the pick up. However, upon their arriving at the distribution location, the local trucks were required to wait 7 hours beyond the stated pick up time for the supplies to arrive at the Pavilion.

On Monday, the City learned that no ice would be available at the Pavilion on Monday so Suffolk purchased ice directly from a local merchant and received bottled water through the Salvation Army. A copy of the City's request for ice, water and generators was faxed to Congressman Forbes for his assistance in expediting the process.

Tuesday morning, 9/23, the City was notified that 7 pallets of ice and 18 pallets of water would be delivered to the Southampton fairgrounds. Later that day, the City was informed that FEMA had no record of the City's request for water and ice. Follow up with State EOC reps noted that they did receive a request from the City for water and ice and they were not sure why FEMA had not received the City's request.

It should be noted that once the Army Corps of Engineers assumed delivery of water and ice on 9/23 and no further problems were experienced with availability or delivery.

Wednesday morning the City faxed to the State EOC a request for emergency mosquito control funding and approval of funding was received on Friday afternoon, 9/26.

The City received a call on Wednesday from the State EOC indicating they were working on our request for generators. With the severity of the situation lessening, on Thursday morning, the City cancelled its request for generators as power was gradually being returned and the City had by then been able to relocate its own generators from public pump stations to private well systems.

On Friday, 9/26, a FEMA Community affairs representative arrived at the City EOC to assess needs and late Saturday a FEMA representative, assessed the Armory as a location for a Disaster Relief Center. The National Guard Armory was selected and opened at 1 p.m. on Thursday, October 2.

Additional confusion surrounded a request from FEMA to the City for 24/7 armed security at the Armory. The City provided security through the use of overtime for off-duty police officers. After the City provided these services for a day and a half, FEMA notified the City that no funding was available for these services although the services were needed. The City withdrew its police officers and ultimately FEMA contracted with private firms to provide these security services at a greater cost.

Given our experiences during Hurricane Isabel, I offer these observations and suggestions for improving our emergency preparation and response process:

1. As noted earlier, policies and procedures require the City to submit its requests for assistance to the State EOC for handling by FEMA. Several times there were miscommunications between the State and FEMA regarding if and when the City had made requests for emergency assistance resulting in a significant time lapse prior to the City receiving a response to its request. The State EOC and FEMA should conduct a review of their communication strategy for emergency situations and make changes to better facilitate the communications process and avoid duplication of efforts.

The State EOC conducted very useful conference calls daily with the localities impacted and perhaps FEMA's participation in these conference calls would be warranted in the future so that better disaster planning and relief efforts might be facilitated.

2. The State, in cooperation with FEMA, might establish a local or regional staging area where pre-stocked water, ice, generators and food could be quickly mobilized prior to and during a storm.
3. Pre-authorization or the establishment of contracts between localities and local vendors for services and products to go into effect upon the determination of need and designation of a state disaster should be considered, perhaps on a regional basis.
4. Hurricane disaster exercises should be a state coordinated priority on an annual basis. These exercises should be conducted on at least a regional basis.
5. Better and timelier information concerning electrical power restoration would be of great value.
6. A local or regional radio station dedicated 24/7 to disaster information would be of great value.
7. The Governor's personal involvement and discussions with elected officials and city managers was useful and appreciated.
8. In Suffolk's case, the involvement of Congressman Forbes' office helped expedite FEMA actions, including the establishment of a Disaster Recovery Center at the City's National Guard Armory.
9. VDOT should participate in annual exercises and report to the state EOC during a disaster concerning its road clearing plans and progress.

I thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments and observations and applaud you for conducting these debriefings with those communities effected by Hurricane Isabel so that we might continue to improve our emergency management and response procedures.